

Local Water Management Around the World The Potential and the Limitations

Workshop Presented at IDRC

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Opening Remarks by
Maureen O'Neil
President, IDRC

Good afternoon to you all, and welcome. Bonjour à tous, et bienvenue. Buenos tardes a todos y bienvenidos. It is an honour, both personally and on behalf of Canada's International Development Research Centre, to participate with you in this Policy Workshop. This is the third in what we intend as an annual series of workshops that emphasize the linkages from research to policy – with particular emphasis on research funded by IDRC for application in developing countries. The first workshop focused on Trade Policy, and the second on Health Sector Reforms. For this workshop, we have turned to our Environment & Natural Resource Management Program for a focus on water, a topic that, by broad agreement, is second in importance only to climate change in global importance – and, as you know, the keynote talk by Dr. Robert Watson later tonight will focus on global change, which is the context within which water management and water policy must exist.

In the most general sense, we have come together here in Ottawa – scholars, ministers, administrators, water-sector professionals – with a dual purpose:

- to improve the transformation of research knowledge into sound water policy for our nations, and
- into adequate, safe water for our fellow citizens.

That means re-examining what we know about the hard facts of water scarcity around the world. But beyond that, it requires us all to identify practical strategies for deploying what we already know about water supply, water demand and water policy in the form of policies and programs with greater effect, and greater equity. We will have to look at the economics of water-sector reform, at the management, and at the politics. And we will have to embrace a principle at the heart of good governance: *that citizens have the right to a meaningful voice in the decisions that govern their lives*. The implication for us is clear. One cannot make good water policy without public participation.

We are not here to look at all aspects of water management, something that would be daunting for a month of workshops, but at local water management. For we have become convinced that strategies of local water management can constitute practical and indeed

superior alternatives to the large-scale, centralized, capital-heavy approaches that have dominated in the past — and that too often failed to deliver on their promises. Local water management is of course the subject of the book that was launched just a few minutes ago, a book that reviews IDRC's experience with local water management and that provides the evidence for the statement I have just made. It is also the focus of much of IDRC's research funding.

Now, at this point, I would like to assert that, early in its history, IDRC identified local water management as a key issue, and the book and the workshop represent the culmination of a deliberate, planned research strategy. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Not that we have any doubts about our conclusions concerning the importance and the efficacy of local water management. Far from it. But this is a position we have come to not in advance but after reviewing research results from many projects originating in many parts of the world — projects as diverse as fog catchers in Chile, gray water utilization in Palestine, organizing women to protect water sources in Kenya, engineered wetlands in Cambodia, and volcanic aquifers in Central America. Only in the latter half of the 1990s did we start to have projects that were explicitly aimed at studying what one researcher called “the option boundaries” for local water management.

Perhaps the fact that IDRC did not identify local water management as a focal point for research was a failing in our strategic planning. But more likely it represents a growing understanding of the nature of water management, and of the extent of water scarcity around the world. In other words, it is a case of research informing research.

Of course, research says more than just what we should put into the proposal for more research. Our broad conclusions about local water management do not stop with emphasis on its potential. They also have a lot to say about its limitations. Local strategies serve invaluablely as complements to wider-reaching water management approaches. But they are no panacea. To misread their uncertainties and limitations, or to neglect them, is to risk failures no less damaging than those of the past.

Here indeed is a case where the North can learn from the South. Our experiences these past few years with poorly designed plans for local water management in Canada have been tragic. Seven dead in Walkerton, Ontario; hundreds ill in North Battleford, Saskatchewan; and no doubt many other cases where water may be suspected but not proven as the source of the problem.

Yes, we still need more research. It is not difficult to come up with a rather large agenda for research. Just as critical, however, and just as strongly emphasized in the book just launched, is a more fluid transmission of good research into policy design, execution and evaluation. We must ensure the timely transmission of research knowledge into water programming and water policy. And just as good water management requires collaboration between local and higher levels of government, so too does this transmission process. Governments have much to do, but so too do local communities, NGOs, water-users associations, youth groups and many others.

We must consider how to design research that better answers the needs of decision-makers; how to engage decision-makers more directly in the results and implications of research; how to facilitate the interaction of policy evaluation, public participation, and policy change. The object is not just to increase the research, but to increase its utility.

In truth, IDRC has always operated on the belief that no “problem”— so-called — can be understood, much less treated, in isolation from its context. Similarly, we try to judge every proposed “solution” by specifying with some care exactly whose lives the solution is likely to improve. By this measure – I say with some sorrow – past efforts at resolving problems of water scarcity around the world cannot always be counted as successes. In too many cases, projects to improve water management have simply reflected and indeed accentuated the inequities and cleavages dividing our societies.

These failures are not just harmful in the obvious ways. They are dangerous. I am convinced that access to adequate quantities of good-quality water to all citizens, including the most vulnerable, is a telling measure of good governance. It demonstrates a democracy’s effectiveness in responding to critical needs of its citizens, needs for health, for livelihoods, for security. Where a democracy fails to organize efficient, fair access to water, it undermines its own legitimacy, signals lack of capacity, and puts at risk the cohesion of its society.

The architects of our workshop have set out an agenda that is as full as it is logical. It begins, as I indicated above, with a review of the global water future, influenced as it must be by the over-riding issue of climate change. We then move, tomorrow morning, to a review of our current experience with local water management from two intersecting perspectives: first, in various regions of the world, including Canada; second, in several of the institutional aspects of local water management, intergovernmental relationships, demand-side management, and gender issues. The implicit questions are how can we take what we have learned from specific experiences in order to draw lessons about water-sector reform across the globe. Taken together, these initial talks provide us with the much of the information needed to address what we can call the political economy of scarce water. Therefore, in the second half of the workshop, we will turn to strategies for doing more and better research in these regions and sub-sectors, and, more importantly, for integrating that research more fully into good policy-making.

I hope fervently that we can progress beyond good intentions. We should always look beyond “outputs” to “impacts,” and this requires the development of real action plans – practical strategies for genuine, achievable reforms. This is always true, but nowhere more so than when we consider local resource management, or, in the specific instance of this workshop, local water management. To advance the delivery of equitable and effective water management is the great opportunity before us – I would add, our greatest obligation.

Thank you. Merci. Gracias.